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ABSTRACT

The Technical Assistance Program of the Society for Crippled Children of Cuyahoga County, Ohio, assists parents in finding child care in community day care programs and day care homes for their children with disabilities. The program provides staff training, on-site consultation and support, liaison with professionals that are involved with the child, and ongoing support throughout the placement. As a result, children have been mainstreamed into more than 90 center-based programs in the greater Cleveland metropolitan area and in numerous day care homes. Described in this document are ways in which day care directors can provide similar support for their staff when a child with disabilities is brought into their program. Discussion focuses on (1) self-preparation of director; (2) preparation of staff, including a staff meeting to consider mainstreaming, training, preparation of children and parents, visits by teachers to other programs attended by the child, and fostering positive attitudes; and (3) support for teachers and caregivers. (RH)

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If You Take That Handicapped Child I'll Quit !

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IF YOU TAKE THAT HANDICAPPED CHILD I'LL QUIT !

Staff in day care centers have many stresses to deal with. These can include low pay, possibly no benefits, low status, large numbers of children to care for, and additional duties such as cleaning the tables or sweeping the floor. When asked to do something else, which they initially perceive as being an additional burden, they resist.

This is what can happen when a teacher is asked to include a child with disabilities in her class. She may be frightened of the unknown and may feel overwhelmed. She might already have a group of children with which she is having difficulty.

The director also has a problem. She may feel pressure from the parents. She would like to include the child, but knows her staff will resist. The director desires to support the teacher, but may not know what to do.

Mainstreaming dilemmas arise all the time. The following is an example of a real-life situation involving a baby with spina bifida.

> The baby's mother enrolled him in a day care center when the director was out of town. The mother neglected to tell the person that did the enrollment that her baby was disabled. She feared that if she told the staff they would turn her down, and she needed day care. The child arrived the next day, and the mother hurried off. Immediately, the caregiver knew that something was not right. The baby's legs were limp, and he did not move around like the other babies. When the director came back the next day, the caregiver said, in no uncertain terms, "I cannot work with this baby. If you keep him, I am quitting."

Fortunately, the director knew about the Technical Assistance Program (TAP) of The Society for Crippled Children of Cuyahoga County, OH, which assists centers and day care homes with mainstreaming. With training and support, the caregiver changed her mind and the child remained at the center.

TAP assists parents in finding child care for their children with disabilities in community child care programs and day care homes. The program provides staff training, on-site consultation and support, liaison with professionals that are involved with the child, and on-going support throughout the placement. This has resulted in children being mainstreamed into more than 90 center-based programs in the greater Cleveland metropolitan area, as well as numerous day care homes.

The situation described above might not have turned out so well if support had not been available. The problem is that most communities have no support system, like TAP, for mainstreaming. Therefore, it is important that directors of programs have the tools for providing support for their staff when they integrate a child with disabilities into the regular program.

PREPARATION OF SELF

If a director is to prepare her staff, she must first prepare herself. The director must examine her own feelings about the disability before she can help others. Only when we acknowledge our feelings of apprehension or reluctance, can we really get on with dealing with the problems and work toward successful integration. The director's attitude is contagious, and a positive attitude can foster a positive attitude in staff.

It is important to be well informed about the child and the child's disability, since knowledge is crucial to developing a good attitude. The primary source of information is the parent. She/he knows the child better than anyone else. Other sources of information are doctors, psycholgists, consultants, special education teachers, and agencies or organizations. There are organiza-

tions that can provide literature on a particular disability, such as the United Cerebral Palsy Association or the Spina Bifida Association. There are also books that provide information on mainstreaming, and some references are provided in the reference list.

The director must know her staff well. She needs to know if her staff can manage this new challenge. Katz (1977) suggests four stages in the developmental level of teachers, (a) survival, (b) consolidation, (c) renewal, and (d) maturity. The teacher in the survival stage is a first year teacher who is just learning how to manage a group and plan lessons. Often it is not advisable to ask a teacher in this stage to mainstream. She is still coping with survival and cannot yet focus on an individual child's needs, especially if they are very different. Teachers in other stages of devlopment are more confident in their teaching, and are ready to accept a new challenge of planning for a child with special needs.

Knowing about the stages also helps the director know the training methods that will be most effective for each teacher. For example, a survival level teacher needs concrete, specific ideas. A more mature teacher can learn much from reading books or journal articles and from going to workshops. However, TAP has learned that an experienced teacher may be at the survival level in terms of working with a disabled child. This teacher needs concrete suggestions and is often eager for a consultant to model techniques for her.

PREPARATION OF STAFF

When the director is asked by parents to include a child with disabilities, she is confronted by a problem. Does she make the decision herself or does she allow the staff to participate in the decision-making process? TAP has found that it works best to talk with staff first. The disability is explained, and staff can then discuss their feelings about working with this child. This is a

very important step because it allows the teachers to have a feeling of some control, and they feel valued. If they can particpate in making the decision, they are more invested in making the integration work.

Staff Meeting to Consider Mainstreaming

TAP's philosophy is to include all staff in the discussion. Eventually all staff encounter the child. A child may move from one class to another in succeeding years, the cook probably will see the child regularly, and some teachers substitute for each other. It is important that staff support one another in the endeavor, and this process allows that to begin.

The director should begin the meeting by describing the child and providing factual information. Staff should be given an idea of how the child could function in the class. It is important to be completely honest about the level of functioning.

Good communication skills and empathy are important considerations for all staff meetings, and that would apply to this meeting also. The following are tips for fostering good communication:

- Don't judge; respect feelings and fears. All feelings are acceptable.
- Don't use your position to influence the decision.
- As staff talk, reflect statements back in a non-judgemental way.
- Rephrase or reword to clarify.
- Put yourself in their place - they are the ones who are going to have to be with the child every day.
- Listen!
- Don't become defensive, and don't respond to provocative statements.
- Have a construct in mind, so you don't get pulled off the subject.

Training

After the staff and director have made the decision to enroll the child with disabilities, training must be provided. This can involve many different things, and varies with the nature and severity of the disability. If the child is orthopedically handicapped, staff might need to know how to position the child or how to help the child hold a cup or fork. If the child is hearing impaired, staff might need to learn some basic signs that the child uses so they can communicate with the child. This training can be provided by the parent or other professional, such as a therapist.

Staff needs to discuss whether any modifications or adaptations need to be made in the classroom. Is there room for the child to move from area to area with his walker? Does the child need some adaptations to the chair? Are the pathways clear so the child is blind can move easily? This training becomes the "how to" session. Most of the time, the disabled child can benefit from the same activities that the other children particiapte in, and often there is no need for modifications. For example, if the program is developmental there will be activities such as sand or water that can be used by children in many different ways. The delayed child can play along side of another child, and each benefits according to his own needs.The director can help the teacher plan appropriately for the child so he can participate fully. This may include a written plan that can serve as a guide as the teacher plans.

The director can help staff focus on the fact that this child is more like other children than he is different. This is a child -- a child who just happens to have a problem. This is also a child who will go through the same developmental stages as other children, perhaps just at a different rate.

Preparation of children and parents

Training needs to include a plan for preparation of the other children in the class, and possibly the entire center. Young children are egocentric and

they are not always able to differentiate between how they experience the world and how others experience it. The child may have apprehensions or fears about "catching it" or having it happen to them if they are sick or bad. Young children learn differently than older children, so need to be prepared differently. Young children need simple, concrete explanations. The teacher can be helped to learn how to talk with the other children. The responses should be simple, such as "her legs don't work like yours," or "he was born this way and it won't happen to you." The teacher can answer questions as they arise, and she can bring up the subject if she notices that a child seems apprehensive. The New Friends and Including All of Us materials can give a teacher ideas for how to talk with the children. The also give ideas for how to address the issues of likenesses and differences. It is important to focus on the child's strengths and what he/she can do, and yet acknowledge the child's problems.

Preparation of the parents is often neglected. Parents should be given information about the disability, and teachers should explain how the children are being prepared. Then if the child asks a question at home, the parent will know how to respond. Information for the parents can be provided in person, in a newsletter, or a parent orientation meeting.

Parents also need information about disabilities so they are not afraid of having their child with the disabled child. One TAP placement involved a child with uncontrolled seizures. The children had been prepared and were doing well. However, one father demanded that the child be removed from the program before his child "caught it." The Epilepsy Foundation was asked to present a parent program, and the father learned that his fears were based on misinformation learned years earlier.

Parents are often concerned that their child will be shortchanged because the disabled child will demand a lot of time. Parents need to be reassured that staff has been prepared, and that they can give all of the children adequate amounts of attention.

Visits to Other Programs

If the child attends a special education program part of the time, the teacher should be encouraged to visit that class. She can learn about the goals for the child and what the rest of his/her day is like. Often these visits can be the beginning of a fruitful communication between the child care teacher and the special education teacher.

Positive Attitudes

The director needs to model a positive attitude, but must also foster this in her staff. The trust level among staff needs to be high. Then staff can share in the responsibility and no one feels like they have the entire responsibility. This might not be an issue if the child has a mild developmental delay, but could be critical if the child has a lot of physical needs or a behavior problem.

SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS AND CAREGIVERS

After staff make the decision to integrate the child, and the training and preparation are complete, the work begins. A director who supports her staff can make the difference between a successful or unsuccessful experience. The following are suggestions for ways that continuing support can be provided:

1. Be available to be "extra hands" the first few days. It takes a little extra work the first days until everyone feels comfortable. It is helpful to have someone available to discuss questions or problems.
2. Praise the teacher's success.
3. Treat the teacher the way you want her to treat the children.
4. LISTEN TO THE TEACHER.
5. Help the teacher determine where the child is functioning developmentally. This may involve doing observations of the child to assist the teacher

in planning.

6. Help secure a volunteer for the classroom or a field trip, when needed.
7. Provide a mental health day if the child is especially difficult to work with.

CONCLUSION

When a center makes a commitment to mainstream, they embark on a new and exciting experience. Staff have an opportunity to grow in their abilities, and frequently they discover that integrating a child with disabilities is not nearly as difficult as they had first imagined. Everyone benefits. The disabled child and his family are provided needed services, as well as an opportunity to be involved in a regular program just like other families. The other children and families learn about differences and they develop tolerance. They learn to know the child as a child, not a disability. The staff masters a challenge, and acquires a feeling of accomplishment.

Things are not always rosy, and problems may arise. But a staff who has the support of their director can deal with the problems and find solutions. The bottom line is commitment.

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